

SECRET HISTORY OF TOYAY

XI--THE HUMBERT MILLIONS.

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These circumstances that I at length free to make an attempt at which I foresee must prove of denial and denunciation. What has become of the Humbert case, like the Dreyfus case, was a masterpiece of the century, who united the personality of a Catherine de Medici, with the genius of an intriguer.

make this declaration without the consequences. If my legal affairs could be brought home to me, it is possible that I might myself in danger of a penalty which has been meted out to Madame Humbert.

However, that I have suffered myself against such a foe. For many months past I engaged in a duel of a singular kind with the famous head of the police, M. Rattache, a duel of which the combatants have exchanged blows of friendship, while exchanging blows of friendship with an assumption of perfect unconsciousness.

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weakness, "You must relieve me of the custody of this treasure." I sat as if mesmerized while I received this staggering proposal, which the extraordinary personage beside me made in the matter-of-fact tone of one who is asking another to undertake the posting of a letter.

This woman, whom I had never seen before, who was beginning to be publicly branded as an adventuress, and who had just confessed herself to be a bankrupt, if not something which the law would call by a harsher name—the woman calmly informed me that she proposed handing over to me a sum equal to the revenue of a kingdom, to be held, as far as I could see, for an unknown length of time, for an unknown owner, and for an unknown purpose.

If it had been any other person in the world who had made me such a proposition, I am certain that I should have laughed at it as a hoax, or, at least, I should have regarded it as a piece of pure nonsense. What was there about this woman, with her figure of a bourgeois, her expressionless face, and dark grey eyes, which compelled me to take her seriously, which made me, against my judgment, submit to become her instrument? In the power of the human will there are mysteries which philosophy has not yet fathomed.

It is true that at this time Madame Humbert still retained the confidence of a very large section of society. There was a man whom I knew well, but his house was a good deal of a distance from the best of the financial world. He had his own house, and there were three other persons present, members of the family.

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"You mean that I should steal this two hundred millions?" I gasped. "That will be the best plan, I think," said Madame Humbert with an approving nod. "I have been concerned in some curious transactions in my time, and in some dangerous ones, but now I feel that I am fairly out of my depth. I know that I was nothing to Madame Humbert; and if it suited her convenience to use me as a cat-paw in the game she was playing with the authorities, might very well find myself in an ugly situation."

What, for example, could be easier than for this accomplished intriguer to set a trap for me, have me arrested, perhaps, in an attempt to break into an empty safe, and thus establish a defense for herself? She would be able to pose as the victim of a robbery, and I should be held responsible for the disappearance of these millions whose existence was in dispute.

I felt my companion's eyes fixed on my face in watchful scrutiny as these reflections passed through my mind. My decision was taken secretly. "You shall hear from me in the morning, madame," I said sharply, rising from my seat. "I'll then, on my return, and out of the house, without giving her an opportunity to press me further."

And I went out of the room, and out of the house, without giving her an opportunity to press me further. I felt my companion's eyes fixed on my face in watchful scrutiny as these reflections passed through my mind. My decision was taken secretly.

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which his Royal Highness the — of — is much interested. Madame Humbert glared at me in anger. "You are mocking me," she cried fiercely. "I came here to ask if you would undertake the recovery of this money from the thief."

"That is unnecessary, madame. All that your friends have to do is to approach him, and breathe in his ear the three words, 'I am going to ask you to undertake a service of an unusual kind.'"

"Oh, if you only require to know who he is, that is soon settled. I will send you the name of the man on the day on which your affair terminates in the courts."

"I began to break upon the mind of the excited woman. "Monsieur V—," she exclaimed. "Is it possible— I drew myself up. "Silence, if you please, madame. I have made you a promise which I shall know how to keep. In the meantime it is clear that we have nothing more to say to one another, and that the sooner you are out of this building the better it will be for all parties."

Madame Humbert rose, gave me a glance in which curiosity, respect and apprehension were strangely mingled, and then she disappeared without venturing to say another word. I have never seen her since.

The following day, as I entered my private room at the usual hour, I was conscious of a singular impression. In the nature of a presentiment. Some one possessed a sense, more subtle than sight or smell, by means of which they are able to detect a personal presence, more especially one hostile to themselves. I have been served by an instinct of this kind more than once, and now it asserted itself so strongly that for an instant I believed that there must be some one hiding in my room.

A glance around removed this suspicion. Everything was in its place as usual—was even more in its place than usual. If I may be permitted the hyperbole, I went to the secret drawer in which I kept the cipher dispatches concerning the Panama affair on which I was engaged about this time.

It seemed to me that the spring worked a little more smoothly than when I had last opened the drawer. The papers inside were exactly as I had left them overnight. Struck by a sudden thought, I pulled the drawer right out, lit a match, and examined the dusty floor of the recesses.

I was rewarded by the sight of one—two—three distinct prints of finger-tips in the dust. That night, of course, told me everything. My office had been ransacked during the night by the French police, and the prints had been left by fingers tapping in search of the hiding-place of the Humbert millions.

It was a startling thing to find M. Rattache so swiftly on my trail, and I inwardly cursed the imprudence which had permitted Madame Humbert to put me on her trail. I put on my hat and started out to the police station in the Quartier Latin which I use for appointments with persons whom it would be inexpedient to receive openly. As I walked round the corner, I saw before me His myrmidons had done their work no less thoroughly here than at my headquarters.

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on a small island, to hack each other to pieces with knives. I moved into my new quarters the same day, some of my personal baggage being brought round by the pretended firemen, who must have wondered to see me on such terms with their chief. Madame Humbert presented me to his wife, a most charming woman with three little daughters, whose hearts I immediately won by organizing all sorts of games at blindman's buff and hide-and-seek.

During the next few days I received other wires from my various agents abroad, informing me that their apartments had been searched, and that they were being shadowed by unknown men. I was pleased with these dispatches, which proved to me that my men were on the alert. I sent encouraging replies, and persuaded Madame Rattache to accompany me to the theatre.

I had already visited a Turkish bath in company with my host, in order to afford him every facility for ascertaining that I was not carrying any portion of the 20,000,000 of my person. At the end of a month my house was in perfect order again. M. Rattache was beginning to feel a little uneasy, perhaps, at my great progress in the friendship of Madame Humbert, and I waited for an opportunity to bring my stay with him to a close. The little girls were in despair at my going, and Madame Rattache earnestly pressed me to come and see them frequently.

Months passed away, and France and Europe were absorbed in learning of the sudden flight of the Humberts, the discovery of the empty safe, the capture of the fugitives, and the trial and sentence of the majestic Therese.

As she was leaving the dock at the end of the case, one of the warders slipped into her hand a piece of paper which contained simply my initials—A. V. I had gone straight from Baron Y—'s house, at the end of our conversation, to the Humbert mansion, gained admittance by means of the master-key which I used.

"I was stopped at the barricade by a pompous sergeant of police," I ally carry about me, opened the safe without the least difficulty, and carried off its contents—all before Madame Humbert had left the house. This instantaneous action, which I had considered necessary for my own protection, turned out to be the best possible course for the safety of the millions.

Now I had redeemed my promise to Madame Humbert, by admitting that I was in possession of the lost treasure, and I waited for a suitable opportunity to claim it. Exactly two days afterward I was surprised by a visit from M. Rattache, whom I had not seen for some time. A smile of welcome greeted me, and he, in a friendly way, asked me to claim the millions.

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"I am going to ask you to undertake a service of an unusual kind."

had, as yet, been no hint of any criminal proceedings against her. Even if there had been, moreover, she had so clearly separated her position as trustee of the millions from her private dealings, that she had convinced me that I could carry out her instructions with regard to the fund, without being guilty of any dishonesty toward the creditors who were proceeding against her estate.

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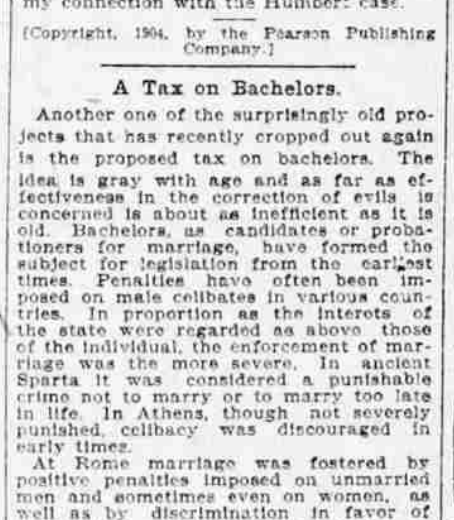
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"The chief detective came close up to me, put his mouth to my ear, and whispered, 'Le drapeau blanc!'"

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